

Statewide rally draws thousands



By Brett Abel

[Contra Costa College Accent Advocate:](#) SACRAMENTO — Wearing homemade shirts and carrying handwritten picket signs, thousands of students from across the state gathered here Monday morning to show the numbers and strength of California community colleges.

Approximately 5,000 students from 80 of the state's 110 community colleges, with the support from a small collection of four-year universities, walked from Raley Field to the Capitol for this year's March in March demonstration.

Roughly 33 students from the district combined to meet up Monday. Contra Costa College

(CCC) ASU President Jeanelle Hope carpooled to the rally with a squad of 10 students and said about 23 students from sister colleges Diablo Valley and Los Medanos colleges made the ride up as well. There were no representatives from the district at last year's protest, called the March for Higher Education.

"We're all here for a great cause," Hope said. "We want to thank our state legislators and ask them 'Please don't raise our fees.'"

District Student Trustee Bundit Kertbundit and Hope were pleased with the number of students who participated in the event, but hope for a better turnout next year.

"There is nothing we can do now, it's over," Kertbundit said. "We can recruit better in the future."

Buses were chartered to accommodate as many as 200 students districtwide — 50 each for CCC and LMC, 100 at DVC.

Last year, community college and four-year university students came together at the steps of the state Capitol to protest cuts to higher education to balance California's budget and reduce the state deficit.

This year's budget, however, spared community colleges, whose funding is connected with K-12.

Student Senate for California Community College President Richael Young said at a press conference before the protest began that the march was to show gratitude toward the governor for not cutting funds to the state's largest public school system.

She said it was also to persuade the lawmakers to vote down legislation to double student fees.

Kertbundit said the State Legislator's Office found the state is still in an \$8 billion deficit and the May revision to the budget may include an increase to fees, a cut in programs or both.

"We're here to express our deepest concern for our future," said Young, a College of San Mateo student. "We lost hundreds of thousands of students (when fees increased \$8 in fall 2004). We can't let that happen again."

CCC student Sean Leroy said if fees jumped from \$20 a unit to more than \$30, there would be students who would not be able to come to school.

"I know that \$30 for units," he said, "people won't be able to afford that."

During the wait for the last of the students from the Raley Field parking lot to reach the Capitol, hundreds of protesters took part in a drum circle and chant at the steps.

Rhythmic yells of "They say cut back, we say fight back" and "Our future, our nation, we need our education" entertained and energized protesters until all marchers were once again unified.

Speakers at the rally ranged from community college students and professors, University of California and California State University students to state legislators.

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi said, “We must invest in you, the students.”

Garamendi has supported student protests, marching with students at the front of last year’s demonstration, and said it is important for the state and its students to have these events.

“This is our future,” he said. “If we don’t provide the education for our students, then the future of California is going to be very grim.”

Students from various backgrounds showed up and spoke to represent the interests of students who were not able to attend.

Troy Carter, vice president of the Student Senate for Community Colleges, spoke not only for community college students, but veterans as well, supporting the GI Bill — government paid tuition or fees for veterans.

Carter spent five years in the military before taking classes at American River College here.

“Veterans need a system they can easily transition into,” Carter said. “Community colleges provide that.”

Some students took advantage of the protest’s publicity to promote other, non-education related agendas, namely the war in Iraq.

Several protesters were carrying signs and wearing stickers to promote an anti-war rally in San Francisco on Saturday’s six-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, to which some students took offense.

Brandy Highan, a student at Solano Community College, said she and a group of students from the Vacaville community college were unaware of the anti-war demonstration and were upset.

“We came out to support our school,” said Highan, whose mother serves in the military. “This isn’t why we’re here.”

The anti-war signs were calling to take funding away from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and put it into the education system.

Highan and Carter, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, said they appreciate the group’s right to free speech, but Highan felt the protesters were at the wrong place.

“We didn’t come to a war protest,” she said. “(Education) is getting forgotten.”